ADVENTURE

Matt and Jeannine Herron:

A Family Odyssey

MATT:

Sometimes trying to function in the cocoon of a conventional lifestyle becomes too much. That happened to Jeannine and me in 1970—we felt stifled in our work, routine in love, fragmented in family life, torn in a thousand directions by the incessant clatter and confusion of our existence in New Orleans. Television was an enemy, Matthew and Melissa, our children, seemed to live in a world of their own, and our happy ideal of a family united by love and common concerns felt remote and unattainable.

Looking for a way out of the malaise, we bagan to put together a long-standing interest in Africa with our dream of taking a voyage in our 31-foot sailboat, *Aquarius*. The catalyst came unexpectedly when Jeannine was offered an attractive research job that would not open up for 18 months. The gift of unencumbered time was exactly what we needed. We decided to sail west from New Orleans across the Atlantic and explore West Africa's coast from our boat.

Why Take Chances?

JEANNINE:

Dear Mom and Dad,

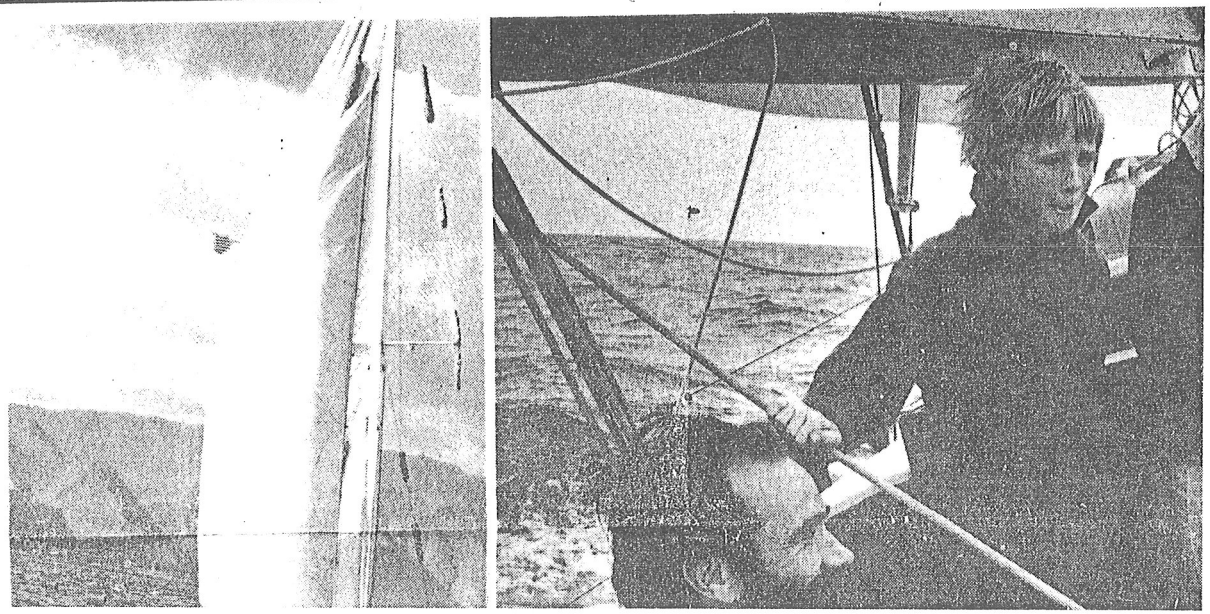
Thanks for your thoughtful letter. We understand your concerns about our trip and I will try to reply the best I can. It's natural to be worried when those you love are contemplating what seems to be a risky venture. I won't deny that there are certain risks in undertaking this trip—risks to our finances, risks to our health, perhaps even our lives. But there are steps we can take to minimize these risks and in the end they may be no greater than the risks of living in a large American city or driving an automobile on American highways.

Actually a well-supplied and well-sailed boat is quite safe at sea. People cross oceans in small sailboats without mishap all the time. Of course there are dangers, but there's something important in learning how to evaluate danger and deal with it. During Hurricane Camille last *month, thirty-six* people gathered in a motel near the beach not far from Gulfport, Mississippi to have a "hurricane party." They were all killed when the building was leveled! It is incredible to me that anyone chose to sion like this—times when you can choose between staying home and sowing your crops, or raking a risk and jumping into the unknown. We happen to think there is a high price to always choosing the safe way. When life becomes routine and predictable, you have stopped testing yourself, and you stop growing.

I know it is difficult for you to understand, but we do not regret taking our children out of school for a year. Some people are horrified when we say this, of course, and their immediate question is, "What will you do about their *education?*" Actually, the more I think about what their "education" is going to be like, the more excited I get.

Matt and I know as little about Africa as the children, so we will all learn together. Some subjects we will have to learn in order to get by—coastline characteristics, climate, geography, even politics. Other subjects we will pursue for pleasure as we stop in various ports—art, history, music, crafts, religion, anthropology and things we haven't even thought of yet! A lot of intangible learning will take place as we shop in strange market places, exchange money and make new friends.

In some ways our education has already begun. In

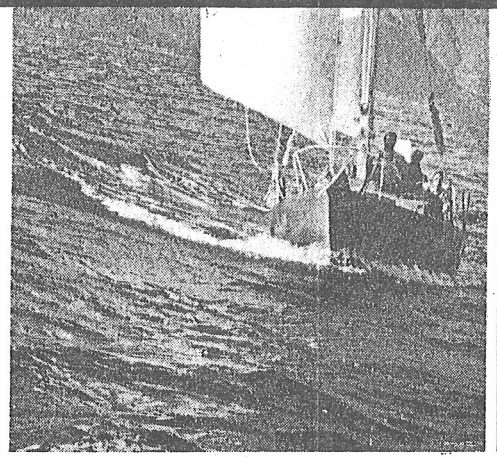


beach not far from Gulfport, Mississippi to have a "hurricane party." They were all killed when the building was leveled! It is incredible to me that anyone chose to stay near the beach after the weather bureau predicted winds of over one hundred fifty miles per hour and tides exceeding twenty feet. What happened to their basic animal instinct for self-preservation? What disastrous failure of nature or society prompted those thirty-six to party in the face of a hurricane? Had they been so sheltered all their lives that they didn't recognize real danger when it finally presented itself? Were they too used to depending on others? Policeman? Mother? Insurance agent? God? Just plain luck?

There is a difficult lesson to learn, relearn and pass on somehow to our children: it is the imperative to persist with a whole skin (and a whole soul) to *challenge* any attack on that wholeness, to know when that integrity is threatened (and equally important, when it's not) and to meet each threat with effective and responsible action. We want our children to be prepared for any danger—the obvious physical ones like Camille and especially the sneaky slow ones that quietly steal the zest and joy out of life and leave you wondering where they went.

You are worried about "finances" and "security." We have different thoughts about security, partly because we have lived in a different age from you. To those who went through the crisis of the depression, security means money in the bank, a good steady job and a nice safe home. But thanks to our parents, we have been fortunate enough never to have experienced the kind of insecurity the depression caused. So we are freed to search for other kinds of security—an inner security, if you will, that doesn't depend on economics, but reflects the talents, capabilities and wisdom we have stored away in our own neurological banks. We both feel confident that we have the ability to make a comfortable living for our family no matter what happens, and this frees us to a certain extent from the necessity of accumulating goods for the future. The idea of having to "start all over again" if we spend all we have on this voyage is not frightening to us because there really is no "start" and no "finish"—there is just LIFE, to be lived as fully as possible. We don't regard the last twelve years as an accumulation of anything but experience—and we can't lose that very easily.

We will put aside some money in the bank in case of emergencies on our trip and leave Matt's mother with the



power of attorney for our affairs. The cost of the trip should not be great unless we run into unforeseen emergencies or repairs. We will simply make our way across the Atlantic via Bermuda and the Azores to Africa, and then proceed slowly down the west coast. We're not going to make hard and fast plans right now, but decide things as we go along. We might sail the boat home, have it shipped back, find somebody else to sail it home, or even sell it. Whatever we do we probably won't lose money. The boat is ours and with the tremendous number of improvements we are making she will be worth much more if we do decide to sell her. Other costs will be modest. We will have no rent, no automobiles to keep up, no insurance, utilities or services. Our life will be simple and groceries inexpensive. Matt will send photographs to Black Star and handle assignments for them in Africa, and we both will be writing. During the struggle to keep my head above water in graduate school I have had little time for reading (other than textbooks), or for writing or thinking, strange as that may seem.

Mom and Dad, in your letter you sounded so worried and sad! I hope I can explain what this trip means to us. There are times when people feel an instinct to reach out and move to the frontiers of their experience. To some this instinct seems like God's whisper, or a special destiny; to us it is just a strong feeling that this is a right thing to do, and that now is the right time to do it. Throughout a lifetime there are many moments of decipreparation for the trip we have made a large map of Africa tacked onto a piece of plywood. We throw darts at it, and each player gains points when his dart lands, by being able to identify the country, the capital, and other pertinent information. (Someone told Melissa that Arabian horses are bred in Senegal so that's always her contribution for Senegal.)

At sea we all will be involved in the everyday business of sailing the boat. We will need each other for every operation—standing watches at the helm, predicting the weather, navigating, cooking and preparing the log. What better reason to learn meteorology, astronomy, physics or mathematics? The ship's log traditionally contains the technical data of a journey's progress, but we hope that ours will also be a record of our thoughts and feelings as we go along—a repository of poems, stories, songs and dreams.

We're going to take lots of books to fill the long TV-less days. We'll read to each other and perhaps even revive the ancient art of storytelling. Matthew never reads for pleasure now, but maybe he will start enjoying reading on the boat. We have always made music together as a family, but there may be time for more of it on the boat. We are taking instruments for all of us. I think learning French will become very important to us if we want to be able to communicate in West Africa, and I intend to use our first aid drills as a way to teaching some basic anatomy and physiology.

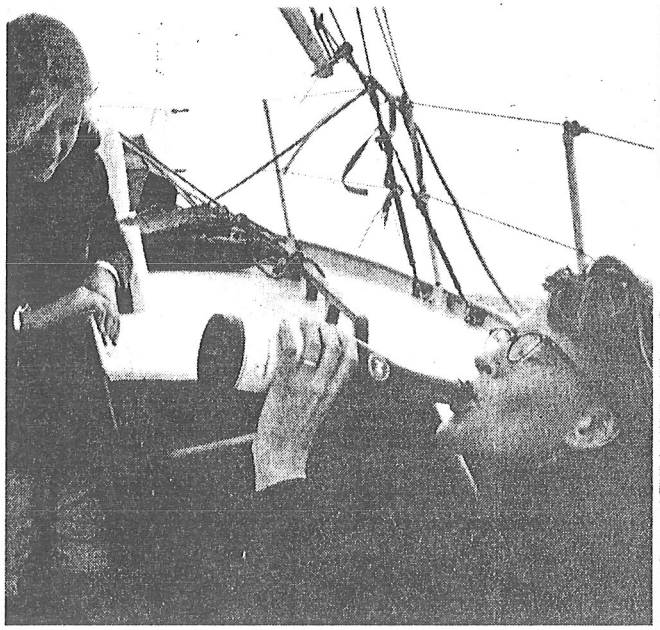
Actually, for me the best part of the trip is that we are

going to be living for a year as close to sunshine, rain, clouds and stars as you can be. And there's just the excitement of the thing—the idea of pitting yourself against the unknown—the game of stretching the ego, always asking a little more of it—the thrill of confronting physical hardship and danger and coming out on top. We need that excitement, that spark. you can immobilize yourself pretty thoroughly in your environment. You can deaden your senses so nothing is too threatening, too sad, or even too joyful. And the self continues to exist—not robust, barely alive. But cut off that spark of excitement, that primitive impulse to learn and explore, and that's when the process of dying begins.

My mind can't even imagine what it must feel like to make landfall after a month of sailing across empty ocean. But I think we'll remember it for a long time.

This letter has gotten lengthy but I want you to understand that our plan is not flippant; we are very serious about it. I hope I have succeeded in resolving some of your many worries. We love you and want you to enjoy our adventure too.

Love,
Jeannine



And it's all amplified by the surrounding space; the slightest finger twitch or whisper takes place under the magnifying glass of enveloping emptiness.

October 1

JEANNINE: The barometer has been incredibly high, lifting our spirits and producing an intoxicating optimism. Yesterday we stretched in the sun, hung our clothes out to dry and congratulated ourselves for a turn of good luck. Captain and First Mate laughed and played and banished everyone from the foredeck for some privacy under the bright sky.

But we celebrated too soon. In the afternoon the wind began to build and the waves got decidedly higher, although the sky remained clear and blue. We told ourselves it was just a windy day, tomorrow would be fine again, but night brought steady intensification.

By morning the barometer had dropped from 30.6 to 30.0 inches and we estimated the wind at force six. We had progressed only seventy miles in the last twenty-four hours. *Aquarius* was struggling now under single-reefed main and working jib, but we were reluctant to reef further because the Azores seemed so close we wanted to as he turned over the tiller to me. "I've really waited too long, but I'm not sure it's a good idea to head her into the wind for reefing against these waves. We've never had waves like this! What do you think?"

"Well, we reefed while powering downwind once and it worked pretty well," I answered. "We won't have as much wind velocity if we're moving with it rather than against it."

"I don't know. Do you think you can keep the boat in better control if we're not fighting the waves?"

We surged upward as a big one rolled under us. "Yeah! I do! It's going to be tricky enough for you to keep your balance up there on the cabin top while you're tying the knots!"

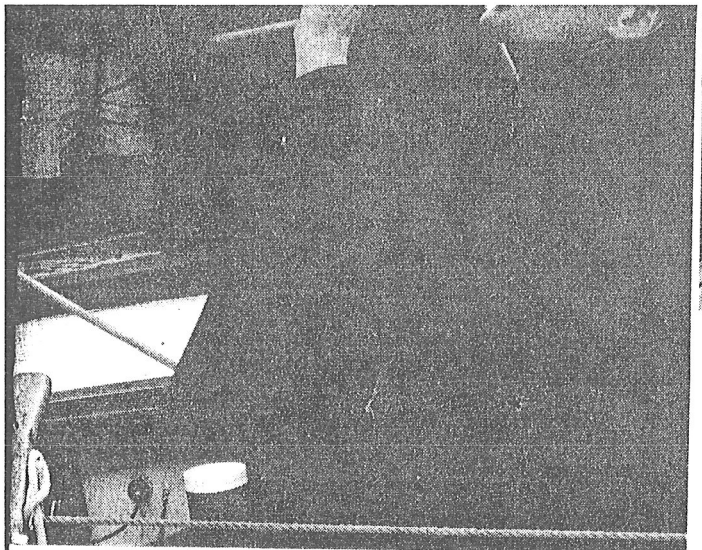
"Okay. Let's try it!"

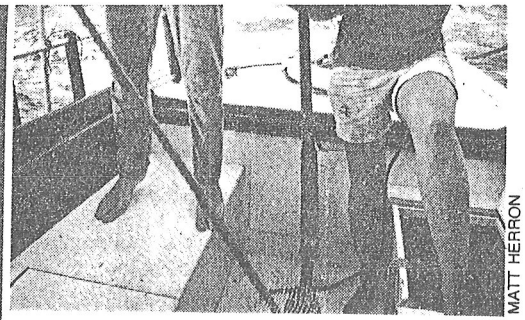
Anxiety and inexperience helped us make that decision. They were not reliable counselors. With the mainsail tightened down amidships there wasn't much pressure on it and our run downwind felt right, but as soon as Matt loosened the main halyard to reef, the wind caught the slack leech and tried to wrap the sail around the mast. Before we could blink, the head of the sail had whipped into the upper shrouds and was torn almost completely off at a point about two feet from the top.

"Son-of-a-bitch!" Matt clawed the flapping sail down to the boom. I eased the boat off the wind, then began to run downwind, fumbling with the engine controls as I considered our mishap. It was serious but not a calamity. Methuselah responded and the tiller became enervated once again. No question what to do next. The mainsail was our stability and our salvation, it must be repaired. We needed all our options in this weather.

"Hand up my ditty-bag!" Matt shouted into the crack between the hatch cover and the closed companionway door.

For three hours he sat on the cabin top braced against the boom, his safety harness snapped to a life line, and stitched, racing the increasing winds and oncoming darkness while I ran the boat westward under power, toward home and the setting sun, eating up the wrong-way miles—the hard-won, wrong-way, turn-around miles. Moving mountains heaved under us as I tried to keep her steady so Matt would not be thrown off. In the valleys we could see nothing but snowcapped walls around us rising to twenty feet or more. When we gained the heights we looked down across the ranges where the snow boiled off into spindrift and melted into the air. It was awesome! We bobbed, a blue seagull, over the rol-





MATT HERRON

Matt and Jeannine Herron and their two children, Matthew and Melissa, sailed the 31-foot *Aquarius* across the Atlantic in the most dramatic episode of an 18-month voyage. During the journey Matt Herron found that "the amount of new information and seamanship skills I had to master in order to voyage safely was the equivalent of learning a whole new profession."

From the Log

September 18

MATT: Almost a week gone and we're yet to sight a ship or any other evidence of living humans inhabiting this planet—only that twice-a-day, disembodied voice, polite and colonial, reciting from Bermuda the accumulated weather observations of ships all over the North Atlantic Ocean—only that to convince us we proceed in company. I'm so lonely this morning I can taste the emptiness. I need a ship—anything—to bounce my aloneness off, to prove by reflection my own existence. My thoughts ring like hollow drums, their impact magnified by the surrounding vacuity. I had the same eerie sensation sailing to Bermuda, but not until we had been lying several days in St. George's harbor did I understand why every action performed in port seemed so much *less significant* than at sea.

At sea the horizon is three miles away—an exact circle of blue all around. You live like a grain of rice in the precise center of an immense blue platter. For the most part nothing happens anywhere else on that platter. A squall, a jumping fish, a flight of sea birds is all that ever disturbs the vast emptiness, the vast *eventlessness* of the surrounding space. On the grain of rice, by comparison, the pressure of events may be very intense; sentient humans living too closely together, generating great densities of movement and emotion. The motion of the boat itself is an unceasing and often highly charged activity.

make as many miles as we could. The cloudless sky belied our notion of storm. Almost imperceptibly the wind hefted itself onto force seven, and the barometer, as depressed as we were, dropped to a new low at 29.7. We had never seen it that low. What was it telling us?

Around lunchtime we realized we were fooling ourselves; the weather wasn't going to go away. In spite of the beguiling sky, we were already into something very bad indeed. Lunch was a hurried, worried sandwich affair. Feeling decidedly green I took to my bunk, but within minutes Matt was calling me out to help.

I struggled into foul-weather gear and weaved out to the cockpit, where my stomach promptly rejected its sandwich. I have learned that it is more efficient to lose a meal gracefully than to fight it down, willfully attempting to control a belligerent autonomic nervous system with the underdeveloped powers of my cortex. (Someday yoga and I will conquer the sea, but this was not the day.)

I looked around, amazed. The elements were engaged in some power trip, an anarchic display. In the tight dry cabin under a warm blanket I had successfully insulated myself from the physical and psychological assaults of the tempest. Out here noise and spray quarreled around me; the waves had grown to an aggressive maturity. I had left my shelter; I was exposed. Oh Lord, what waves! No longer boyish, live-and-let-live spirits, they now communicated immediate, unmistakable authority.

"We've got to go to a full storm reef," Matt shouted toward home and the setting sun, eating up the wrong-way miles—the hard-won, wrong-way, turn-around miles. Moving mountains heaved under us as I tried to keep her steady so Matt would not be thrown off. In the valleys we could see nothing but snowcapped walls around us rising to twenty feet or more. When we gained the heights we looked down across the ranges where the snow boiled off into spindrift and melted into the air. It was awesome! We bobbed, a blue seagull, over the rollers. As long as I could keep from catching a wave sideways, *Aquarius* simply lifted up one side and skied down the other.

In the midst of all this turmoil a strange agitation near the boat caught my eye. It was an immense sea turtle thrashing awkwardly at the surface as if he had suddenly forgotten how to swim.

"Hey! Matthew! Melissa! Come see a turtle!" The hatch slid back and two yellow-crested slickerheads cautiously emerged from the safety of their nest below.

"Wow! He's huge! What's he doing way out here?" Matthew shouted above the wind.

"Why is he struggling so hard at the surface when he could be down below where it's peaceful?" Melissa asked. "JESUS CHRIST! Look at the WAVES!"

"Watch out!" I shouted. "Here comes a big one!" The children ducked inside and slid the hatch closed just as a wave slammed across the bulwarks and doused us with spray. Matt stopped sewing and wrapped himself tighter around the boom while *Aquarius* lurched sickeningly up on the verge of the wave, leaping like a jet toward the distant sun. For a split second she hung suspended as the wave moved out from under her, then she dived heavily downward, crashing with seven-ton impetus toward the bottom of a valley which kept dropping out below us. The impact rattled our teeth and sent up a fabulous spray, but we weren't dislodged. *Aquarius* calmly righted herself as if to apologize for trying to fly. The turtle had disappeared.

Matt threw me a look of concern and thanks. Our eyes met with a jolt of recognitions. Here we were at the "decisive moment." This was what it was like to be in a gale at sea! It was a moment which, in our virginity, we had approached with considerable apprehension. But now that it had arrived, it was not fear we felt but an intense concentration of emotions—joy, awe, exhilaration, humility—a justification of all moments. We knew the ocean now, more intimately. We had unclothed and touched secret aspects. What the future held for this relationship was not important; we had lost our innocence and we were not afraid. That was enough.

—*From* The Voyage of Aquarius,
to be published this month by E. P. Dutton